



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



Neils Larsen Stevns, *Zacchaeus*, 2006.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD

St. Frances de Sales

*It is good to mistrust ourselves,
but how would that advantage us
were we not to throw all our confidence on God,
and to wait on His mercy?
If you feel no such confidence,
cease not on that account from making these acts
and from saying to Our Lord:
"Yet, O Lord, though I have no feeling of confidence in You,
nevertheless, I know that You are my God,
that I am all Yours,
and that I have no hope but in Your goodness;
so, I abandon myself entirely into Your Hands."
It is always in our power to make these acts;
although we have difficulty in performing them,
still there is no impossibility.
Thus we testify faithfulness to our Lord.*

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

© Mary Birmingham,
2011. All rights reserved.

Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.
- ▶ The Wisdom reading is chosen and taken out of its original context in order to serve as preparation for the Gospel. God's love knows no boundaries. God's love and mercy is unfathomable. God invites us into deep intimacy with him. God may challenge the sinner to repentance but he always welcomes the sinner home.
- ▶ In today's gospel Jesus is in Jericho—a city with the lowest elevation in the world—three hundred meters below sea level contrasted with Jerusalem which is a thousand meters above sea level.
- ▶ Jericho is an oasis in the desert.
- ▶ It is here Jesus seeks out Zachaeus and invites his conversion.
- ▶ Even though Zachaeus was a sinner, he, like Abraham, exercised great faith.
- ▶ His exemplary effort to reach out and accept Jesus' offer of conversion is an example for us all.
- ▶ Zachaeus was deeply transformed by his encounter with Christ.
- ▶ Today begins the last Pauline letter proclaimed in cycle C—the letter to the Thessalonians.
- ▶ The letters to the Thessalonians are the oldest letters in the corpus of letters in the tradition.
- ▶ They were written about twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- ▶ The letters exhort vigilance and preparedness for the Lord's return—a most apt reflection in the latter days of the Church year when our focus is on end times and last things.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: Wisdom 11:22-12:2

- ▶ Popular imagination suggests that Solomon is the author of one of the last books in the Old Testament (@60 BC), the Book of Wisdom.
- ▶ Scholars insist, however, that it was written long after Solomon's death.
- ▶ We do not know who the author is but we do know he was versed in Greek culture and philosophy.
- ▶ Greek culture and philosophy was rapidly expanding. People were struggling with issues that questioned the meaning of life (such as: why do good people suffer and why do bad people seem to enjoy prosperity?).
- ▶ The people were experiencing a serious crisis of faith and values.
- ▶ Jewish life was at stake. People were leaving Judaism to pursue pagan philosophies.
- ▶ Something was needed to counteract the Greek philosophical movement—the

Book of Wisdom was just the apologetic needed.

- ▶ Jewish faith and life were threatened. Wisdom was the antidote.
- ▶ The book's operating assumption is that what one learns about life should have an influence on how that life is lived.
- ▶ The author seeks to elucidate God's role in human history.
- ▶ The first part seeks to reflect upon the virtue of seeking *wisdom* above all other endeavors.
- ▶ The second part of the book identifies how *wisdom* works in the world and how people might find it for themselves.
- ▶ Today's reading reminds us of our own insignificance before God.
- ▶ God's omnipotence and transcendent majesty highlights our need for his care, benevolence and mercy. Without God we are nothing.
- ▶ The word *love* in this pericope is used as a dynamic ongoing reality—God constantly recreates us in his love. He forges an ever increasing intimacy with us as he invites our conversion and forgives our sins.
- ▶ Even though human beings tarnished God's creation through sin, it is nevertheless God's to destroy. God's Spirit is in all things and God alone has control over the created order.
- ▶ Why would God want to destroy his most beloved creation—tarnished as a result of sin though he or she may be?
- ▶ God's mercy is always available to restore his work of art.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about who we are in relation to who God is?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about how we should respond to God?
- ▶ In what way has God spared you and protected you?
- ▶ In what way are you aware of God's forgiveness in your life? What tangible evidence do you have that God has forgiven you as this reading insists?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this reading? What are the implications?
- ▶ What is God asking of you in response to his great mercy?

Second Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

- ▶ Paul wrote to the various communities in order to strengthen and teach them in his absence.
- ▶ Paul's community embraced the Good News, but they did not always appreciate the implications of Gospel living. Paul's job was to instruct them.

- ▶ Paul's evangelization brought about the conversion of some prominent Jewish women and many more Gentiles. This infuriated the Jewish community. They dragged Paul's cohort Jason before a court to accuse him of treason for suggesting that Jesus was a king.
- ▶ The Thessalonian hecklers followed Paul as he moved on from Macedonia to Athens and finally to Corinth his ultimate headquarters.
- ▶ Paul's first letter was sent to the communities to exhort them to be steadfast and not to lose hope or faith in the Gospel in the face of pending persecution.
- ▶ The second letter seems to address that persecution directly. The communities were fearful. Many believed the end was near; judgment seemed to be just around the corner. Some people quit working believing that Jesus would be coming soon to take them home.
- ▶ This belief in the immanence of the end was due in part to the community's immaturity and Paul's admonishments to remain steadfast as well as the apocalyptic fervor of the times.
- ▶ Paul gave no time table for the Lord's return. He insisted that believers remain faithful and watchful.
- ▶ His simple encouragement had the effect of feeding their apocalyptic imagination.
- ▶ Paul was simply encouraging diligence while they read it as, "the end is upon us!" The people could not be bothered with the things of everyday life.
- ▶ Paul was also combating a gnostic notion that the true spiritual nature of the human soul was revealed to only an elite few. One was either privileged to be so enlightened or one was not. Once the true nature was revealed to the gnostic, the day of the Lord had already arrived for that enlightened, elite person.
- ▶ Such persons were already immortal; they already enjoyed their own resurrection.
- ▶ Paul was incredulous at this absurd aberration of the Gospel.
- ▶ The Lord had not arrived, the end was not here—much work still needed to be done.
- ▶ God's gift of salvation was completely gratuitous and unmerited.
- ▶ Believers must be diligent, watchful and prepared. The rest is up to God.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ How might we compare the apocalyptic fervor of Paul's community with the economic times we are now experiencing? What is the message for our Christian communities in the midst of these difficult times?
- ▶ What would Paul have to say to us today?

- ▶ Have you ever secretly wished that Jesus would just return soon? What would compel such a wish? What does Paul have to say about such a wish?
- ▶ What are the implications of this reading for our communities today?

Gospel: Luke 19, 1-10

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
 - ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
-
- ▶ Zacchaeus is contrasted with the wealthy man in a previous chapter. Even though by all appearances he seemed like a righteous man, the latter could not let go of his possessions.
 - ▶ Zachaeus on the other hand was not considered a righteous man since he was a tax collector—the chief tax man for Jericho. No one would have lined up to speak for his integrity!
 - ▶ Tax collectors charged huge interest on the taxes owed and used less than honorable means to collect them. The people hated the tax collector who was always considered unclean and unrighteous.
 - ▶ Zacchaeus is converted in heart and soul and promised to make restitution—to go beyond what is demanded and expected by the Torah.
 - ▶ The Torah insisted that when someone was cheated out of money, the offender must add one fifth to the original amount in order to make restitution.
 - ▶ On the other hand, if someone was caught in the act of stealing, the amount would be four or five times the amount stolen.
 - ▶ Zacchaeus agreed to pay the maximum amount—thus acknowledging his responsibility for cheating the people.
 - ▶ The wealthy man of the previous chapter seemed by all appearances to be the righteous one yet he declined the Lord's offer of hospitality and relationship.
 - ▶ Zacchaeus on the other hand, went the extra mile to accept the Lord's invitation, repent and make restitution for his sins.
 - ▶ Appearances can be deceiving. The paradox in this story exists in the answer to the question: Who is righteous and who is not? The person normally believed to be unjust and unrighteous ends up being called the child of Abraham.
 - ▶ The underlying truth in this story is that there never is a time when love is not offered and salvation is not given. There is however, a time when love is not accepted and salvation is not received.
 - ▶ Zacchaeus did nothing to receive Jesus' love. It was freely given. Jesus' offer of love invited deep transformation of heart and soul in Zacchaeus.
 - ▶ Zacchaeus reached out in faith, however. He received the love that was offered.
 - ▶ Possessions are an indicator of the believer's heart—the wealthy man could not let

go and accept the Lord's invitation.

- ▶ Zacchaeus' willingness to do more than the law required was indicative of a truly transformed heart and a heart open not only to Jesus but to the poor ones Jesus cared so much about.
- ▶ This story illustrates how a sinner lived the Gospel imperative more than the perceived righteous person lived it.
- ▶ The implications of this story and the story of the wealthy man in chapter eighteen raises questions about whether or not a rich person can be saved.
- ▶ Yes a rich person can be saved. Rich or poor there are responsibilities that come with salvation, however. Those responsibilities include love of God with heart and soul, love of neighbor with heart and soul, care for God's poor and God's creation and abandoning one's life into God's care.
- ▶ This story is a reminder that Jesus ate with sinners and outcasts. Jesus saved the lost—wherever he found them. Where would he find them today?
- ▶ Salvation is freely offered and freely given. It needs only to be received. Only those who acknowledge their need are open to receive it. Arrogant pride is a huge obstacle.
- ▶ This story is eschatological in so far as it highlights the salvation Jesus offered and it referred to him as the Son of Man.
- ▶ The Son of Man, according to Jewish belief, was a heavenly figure that would one day appear at the Parousia.
- ▶ The early Church appropriated that Jewish belief in the future Son of Man to Jesus, the Christ.
- ▶ The reference to the Son of Man in this text is a mystagogical reflection by the early church that was looking back on Jesus Christ as that Son of Man who came to save the lost and unsaved.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this story teach us about God's relationship with us?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about our own lives and how we should approach God?
- ▶ What does Zacchaeus teach us about how we should look upon our own lives?
- ▶ What modern day correlation can we make when it comes to Zacchaeus' response to Jesus? What are the implications for us today?
- ▶ What is usually our response when our sinful actions are opened up for scrutiny?

- ▶ Consider your own spiritual and religious life today. Would you find yourself in the tree like Zacchaeus or on the ground shaking your head at Zacchaeus' sinfulness?
- ▶ Where is conversion needed in your life?
- ▶ With whom would Jesus dine today? Who are the lost ones (outcasts) he would come to save? Would Jesus be met with resounding affirmation for reaching out to today's outcasts? What kind of criticism would he receive today?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97

APPENDIX

#1. The challenge of this reading is to believe it with my entire being—to trust that I am forgiven and that my entire life is in God's hands. I often say that with my words and then behave differently. I have a beautiful family. I have three beautiful grandchildren and we await the birth of precious twin girls. Life is good. Yet still I complain that God is slow to act with my very sick child.

God continues to ask me to submit and relinquish control of my life into his care. I am invited to believe that God cares for my very sick child as much as I do and then entrust him to God's care.

My sin is that I always take back control, thinking quite stupidly that I can do a better job than God. I always fail! This reading from Wisdom is a clarion call to remind me (us) that God is my (our) Creator and I am (we are) but his creature. Why would I think God would only give a scorpion when I so fervently ask for bread? Herein is my sin—lack of trust. In spite of my sin God loves and forgives and has compassion and mercy on me and on my child. Such is the promise of this reading.

#2. It would be very easy to be caught up in the apocalyptic fervor that the Thessalonian community experienced. Very often when times are difficult apocalyptic fever breaks out and people are certain that Jesus will return on a specific day. Our faith insists that the day or hour does not matter. We should be ready at all times.

When we focus solely on such a preoccupation, it is a distraction. When our focus becomes the day and the hour of the Lord's return we lose what our focus should be—the ongoing, daily presence of Christ within us.

Several years ago people flocked to a Florida city because it was believed that Jesus' image appeared on the side of a bank building. Why do we move heaven and earth to see such phenomenon when the only place we need to look is within the temple of our own souls where Christ participates in our life each and every day? My job is to tap into the Christ/Spirit who constantly prays within me and not get caught up in distractions—especially distractions disguised as good for the soul.

#3. It is very difficult to have our actions challenged by another person. We may invite such scrutiny but when it comes, it is very difficult to receive. Our culture today decries admission of wrong-doing. It is a sign of weakness to admit one's failing and faults. Yet the gospel offers a different model.

Zacchaeus acknowledged his wrong-doing and promised to make it right. How many of us besmirch the good name of another person through our gossip yet see nothing wrong with it and when challenged do nothing to restore the person's good name?

A man once came to me to apologize for gossiping about me. He told me that someone had told him all sorts of unkind things about me and rather than get to know me

personally he chose to side with the gentleman and perpetuate further gossip.

He then had an opportunity to meet me. He discovered for himself that I was not the ogre that he thought I was. He told me that his actions were extremely unchristian and he apologized, told me he confessed his sin in the sacrament of reconciliation and asked my forgiveness.

This man was an amazing example to me of what I should do whenever tempted to believe the worst about another person. Appearances are not always what they seem. Zachaeus was considered an unrighteous sinner. Yet he went way beyond what was expected to make amends for his sins. The judgmental righteous ones are not even aware that they are the true sinners. I would hope to emulate Zacchaeus and not those who are convinced of their own righteousness.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Salvation
Catholic Social Teaching
Heaven, Hell and Purgatory
Stewardship

Kingdom of God
Sin and Grace
Sacrament of Reconciliation
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

SALVATION

Today's liturgy is a testament to God's saving power. The first reading reminds us that God saves the sinner. The second reading invites preparedness and watchfulness for the Lord's coming in our lives and the Gospel witnesses to the salvation of Zacchaeus—a prototype for each and every one of us—sinners before God. Jesus reached out and invited Zacchaeus to repent and accept his hospitality and to be converted of heart. It is an invitation extended to all people inclusively. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SALVATION.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The issue of who is an insider and who is an outsider in today's Gospel is still an issue. Zacchaeus is considered the outsider because he is the tax collector. The Gospel reminds us that Jesus reaches out to save rich and poor alike. All are welcome in God's kingdom. Such is the basis of our Catholic Social teaching. All people possess basic human dignity and are to be treated as equals in the reign of God. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY

Today's second reading and Gospel look to that future day when all are saved and will be judged by God on the last day. We are to be prepared for that day whether it comes tomorrow or in the future. The reference to the Son of Man in the Gospel is a reminder of that future day when the Lord will return to take us all home to be with him forever. The reference is a mystagogical reflection by the early church that was looking back on Jesus Christ as that Son of Man who came to save the lost and unsaved. It is thus most appropriate as the Church year begins its slow winding down that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, and HELL AND PURGATORY.

STEWARDSHIP

Zacchaeus made restitution of the money he had cheated from the people when he collected taxes from them. While cheating was abhorrent in the first place, his restitution went well beyond what was expected. Once converted to Christ he became a good steward of the money that he received. He used it in the proper way—he returned it to those he had cheated—not just what he cheated but five times over the amount! He understood that his resources were intimately tied to his relationship with God. He would not have been required to go the extra mile, but did so out of love and in response to God’s mercy. His use of resources flowed out of that love and mercy which is the basis of what we believe about STEWARDSHIP. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about STEWARDSHIP.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Jesus illustrates what it means to live in the kingdom he came to establish. He invites deep conversion of heart. He welcomes the sinner and invites the outcast to come to his house. When one is invited into the kingdom one must be prepared to abandon one’s life completely to God. Today’s liturgy is a reminder that we are all called to live in his kingdom. We are all called to let go of our possessions, seek God out with a passion, climb the nearest tree if need be and rest in the arms of Christ who comes to save. It is thus most fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

SIN AND GRACE

Today’s Gospel reminds us that sin is illusive. Normally the tax collector is an icon of the sinner. Yet in today’s Gospel he is an icon of repentant and grace-filled child of Abraham. Zacchaeus knew that he was a sinner and promised to amend his life. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches us today about SIN AND GRACE.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

We are blessed to have a remedy for the sin in our lives. Zacchaeus was aware of his sinfulness...and made five-fold restitution. He acknowledged his sinfulness and showed contrition for his sins. Such is the basis for the sacrament of reconciliation. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention today on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.